

Home Sickness

by

George Moore

1914

HE told the doctor he was due in the bar-room at eight o'clock in the morning ; the bar-room was in a slum in the Bowery ; and he had only been able to keep himself in health by getting up at five o'clock and going for long walks in the Central Park.

‘ A sea-voyage is what you want,’ said the doctor.

‘ Why not go to Ireland for two or three months ? You will come back a new man.’

‘ I'd like to see Ireland again.’

And he began to wonder how the people at home were getting on. The doctor was right. He thanked him, and three weeks after he landed in Cork.

As he sat in the railway-carriage he recalled his native village, built among the rocks of the large headland stretching out into the winding lake. He could see the houses and the streets, and the fields of the tenants, and the Georgian mansion and the owners of it ; he and they had been boys together before he went to America. He remembered the villagers going every morning to the big house to work in the stables, in the garden, in the fields—mowing, reaping, digging, and Michael Malia building a wall ; it was all as clear as if it were yesterday, yet he had been thirteen years in America ; and when the train stopped at the station the first thing he did was to look round for any changes that might have come into it. It was the same blue limestone station as it was thirteen years ago, with the same five long miles between it and Duncannon. He had once walked these miles gaily, in little over an hour, carrying a heavy bundle on a stick, but he did not feel strong enough for the walk to-day, though the evening tempted him to try it. A car was waiting at the station, and the boy, discerning from his accent and his dress that Bryden had come from America, plied him with questions, which Bryden answered rapidly, for he wanted to hear who were still living in the village, and if there was a house in which he could get a clean lodging. The best house in the village, he was told, was Mike Scully's, who had been away in a situation for many years, as a coachman in the King's County, but had come back and built a fine house with a concrete floor. The boy could recommend the loft, he had slept in it himself, and Mike would be glad to take in a lodger, he had no doubt. Bryden remembered that Mike had been in a situation at the big house. He had intended to be a jockey, but had suddenly shot up into a fine tall man, and had become a coachman instead ; and Bryden tried to recall his face, but could only remember a straight nose and a somewhat dusky complexion.

So Mike had come back from King's County, and had built himself a house, had married there were children for sure running about ; while he, Bryden, had gone to America, but he had come back ; perhaps he, too, would build a house in Duncannon, and—— His reverie was suddenly interrupted by the carman.

‘ There's Mike Scully,’ he said, pointing with his whip, and Bryden saw a tall, finely built, middle-aged man coming through the gates, who looked astonished when he was accosted, for he had forgotten Bryden even more completely than Bryden had forgotten him ; and many aunts and uncles were mentioned before he began to understand.

‘ You’ve grown into a fine man, James,’ he said, looking at Bryden’s great width of chest. ‘ But you’re thin in the cheeks, and you’re very sallow in the cheeks too.’

‘ I haven’t been very well lately—that is one of the reasons I’ve come back ; but I want to see you all again.’

‘ And thousand welcome you are.’

Bryden paid the carman, and wished him ‘ God-speed.’ They divided the luggage, Mike carrying the bag and Bryden the bundle, and they walked round the lake, for the townland was at the back of the domain ; and while walking he remembered the woods thick and well-forested ; now they were wind-worn, the drains were choked, and the bridge leading across the lake inlet was falling away. Their way led between long fields where herds of cattle were grazing ; the road was broken—Bryden wondered how the villagers drove their carts over it, and Mike told him that the landlord could not keep it in repair, and he would not allow it to be kept in repair out of the rates, for then it would be a public road, and he did not think there should be a public road through his property.

At the end of many fields they came to the village, and it looked a desolate place, even on this fine evening, and Bryden remarked that the county did not seem to be as much lived in as it used to be. It was at once strange and familiar to see the chickens in the kitchen ; and, wishing to re-knit himself to the old customs, he begged of Mrs. Scully not to drive them out, saying they reminded him of old times.

‘ And why wouldn’t they ?’ Mike answered, ‘ he being one of ourselves bred and born in Duncannon, and his father before him.’

‘ Now, is it truth ye are telling me ?’ and she gave him her hand, after wiping it on her apron, saying he was heartily welcome, only she was afraid he wouldn’t care to sleep in a loft.

‘ Why wouldn’t I sleep in a loft, a dry loft !’ ‘ You’re thinking a good deal of America over here,’ said he, ‘ but I reckon it isn’t all you think it. Here you work when you like and you sit down when you like ; but when you’ve had a touch of blood- poisoning as I had, and when you have seen young people walking with a stick, you think that there is something to be said for old Ireland.’

‘ You’ll take a sup of milk, won’t you ? You must be dry,’ said Mrs. Scully.

And when he had drunk the milk Mike asked him if he would like to go inside or if he would like to go for a walk.

‘ Maybe resting you’d like to be.’

And they went into the cabin and started to talk about the wages a man could get in America, and the long hours of work.

And after Bryden had told Mike everything about America that he thought of interest, he asked Mike about Ireland. But Mike did not seem to be able to tell him much. They were all very poor—poorer, perhaps, than when he left them.

‘ I don’t think anyone except myself has a five-pound-note to his name.’

Bryden hoped he felt sufficiently sorry for Mike. But after all Mike's life and prospects mattered little to him. He had come back in search of health, and he felt better already ; the milk had done him good, and the bacon and the cabbage in the pot sent forth a savoury odour. The Scullys were very kind, they pressed him to make a good meal ; a few weeks of country air and food, they said, would give him back the health he had lost in the Bowery ; and when Bryden said he was longing for a smoke, Mike said there was no better sign than that. During his long illness he had never wanted to smoke, and he was a confirmed smoker.

It was comfortable to sit by the mild peat fire watching the smoke of their pipes drifting up the chimney, and all Bryden wanted was to be left alone ; he did not want to hear of anyone's misfortunes, but about nine o'clock a number of villagers came in, and Bryden remembered one or two of them—he used to know them very well when he was a boy ; their talk was as depressing as their appearance, and he could feel no interest whatever in them. He was not moved when he heard that Higgins the stonemason was dead ; he was not affected when he heard that Mary Kelly, who used to go to do the laundry at the Big House, had married ; he was only interested when he heard she had gone to America. No, he had not met her there ; America is a big place. Then one of the peasants asked him if he remembered Patsy Carabine, who used to do the gardening at the Big House. Yes, he remembered Patsy well. He had not been able to do any work on account of his arm ; his house had fallen in ; he had given up his holding and gone into the Poor-House. All this was very sad, and to avoid hearing any further unpleasantness, Bryden began to tell them about America. And they sat round listening to him ; but all the talking was on his side ; he wearied of it ; and looking round the group he recognized a ragged hunchback with grey hair ; twenty years ago he was a young hunchback, and, turning to him, Bryden asked him if he were doing well with his five acres.

‘ Ah, not much. This has been a poor season. The potatoes failed ; they were watery—there is no diet in them.’

These peasants were all agreed that they could make nothing out of their farms. Their regret was that they had not gone to America when they were young ; and after striving to take an interest in the fact that O'Connor had lost a mare and a foal worth forty pounds, Bryden began to wish himself back in the slum. And when they left the house he wondered if every evening would be like the present one. Mike piled fresh sods on the fire, and he hoped it would show enough light in the loft for Bryden to undress himself by.

The cackling of some geese in the street kept him awake, and he seemed to realize suddenly how lonely the country was, and he foresaw mile after mile of scanty fields stretching all round the lake with one little town in the far corner. A dog howled in the distance, and the fields and the boreens between him and the dog appeared as in a crystal. He could hear Michael breathing by his wife's side in the kitchen, and he could barely resist the impulse to run out of the house, and he might have yielded to it, but he wasn't sure that he mightn't awaken Mike as he came down the ladder. His terror increased, and he drew the blanket over his head. He fell asleep and awoke and fell asleep again, and lying on his back he dreamed of the men he had seen sitting round the fireside that evening, like spectres they seemed to him in his dream. He seemed to have been asleep only a few minutes when he heard Mike calling him. He had come half-way up the ladder, and was telling him that breakfast was ready. ‘ What kind of a breakfast will he give me ?’ Bryden asked himself as he pulled on his clothes. There were tea and hot griddle cakes for breakfast, and there were fresh eggs ; there was sunlight in the kitchen, and he liked to hear Mike tell of the work he was going to be at in the farm—one of about fifteen acres, at least ten of it was grass ; he grew an acre of potatoes, and some corn, and some turnips for his sheep. He had a nice bit of meadow, and he took down his scythe, and as he put the whetstone in his belt Bryden noticed a second scythe, and he asked Mike if he should go down with him and help him to finish the field.

‘ It’s a long time since you’ve done any mowing, and its heavier work than you think for. You’d better go for a walk by the lake.’ Seeing that Bryden looked a little disappointed, he added, ‘ If you like you can come up in the afternoon and help me to turn the grass over.’ Bryden said he would, and the morning passed pleasantly by the lake shore—a delicious breeze rustled in the trees, and the reeds were talking together, and the ducks were talking in the reeds ; a cloud blotted out the sunlight, and the cloud passed and the sun shone, and the reed cast its shadow again in the still water ; there was a lapping always about the shingle ; the magic of returning health was sufficient distraction for the convalescent ; he lay with his eyes fixed upon the castles, dreaming of the men that had manned the battlements ; whenever a peasant driving a cart or an ass or an old woman with a bundle of sticks on her back went by, Bryden kept them in chat, and he soon knew the village by heart. One day the landlord from the Georgian mansion set on the pleasant green hill came along, his retriever at his heels, and stopped surprised at finding somebody whom he didn’t know on his property. ‘ What, James Bryden !’ he said. And the story was told again how ill-health had overtaken him at last, and he had come home to Duncannon to recover. The two walked as far as the pine-wood, talking of the county what it had been, the ruin it was slipping into, and as they parted Bryden asked for the loan of a boat.

‘ Of course, of course !’ the landlord answered, and Bryden rowed about the islands every morning ; and resting upon his oars looked at the old castles, remembering the prehistoric raiders that the landlord had told him about. He came across the stones to which the lake-dwellers had tied their boats, and these signs of ancient Ireland were pleasing to Bryden in his present mood.

As well as the great lake there was a smaller lake in the bog where the villagers cut their turf. This lake was famous for its pike, and the landlord allowed Bryden to fish there, and one evening when he was looking for a frog with which to bait his line he met Margaret Dirken driving home the cows for the milking. Margaret was the herdsman’s daughter, and lived in a cottage near the Big House ; but she came up to the village whenever there was a dance, and Bryden had found himself opposite to her in the reels. But until this evening he had had little opportunity of speaking to her, and he was glad to speak to someone, for the evening was lonely, and they stood talking together.

‘ You’re getting your health again,’ she said, ‘ and will be leaving us soon.’

‘ I’m in no hurry.’

‘ You’re grand people over there ; I hear a man is paid four dollars a day for his work.’

‘ And how much,’ said James, ‘ has he to pay for his food and for his clothes ?’

Her cheeks were bright and her teeth small, white and beautifully even ; and a woman’s soul looked at Bryden out of her soft Irish eyes. He was troubled and turned aside, and catching sight of a frog looking at him out of a tuft of grass, he said :

‘ I have been looking for a frog to put upon my pike line.’

The frog jumped right and left, and nearly escaped in some bushes, but he caught it and returned with it in his hand.

‘ It is just the kind of frog a pike will like,’ he said. ‘ Look at its great white belly and its bright yellow back.’

And without more ado he pushed the wire to which the hook was fastened through the frog's fresh body, and dragging it through the mouth he passed the hooks through the hind-legs and tied the line to the end of the wire.

‘ I think,’ said Margaret, ‘ I must be looking after my cows ; it's time I got them home.’

‘ Won't you come down to the lake while I set my line ?’

She thought for a moment and said :

‘ No, I'll see you from here.’

He went down to the reedy tarn, and at his approach several snipe got up, and they flew above his head uttering sharp cries. His fishing-rod was a long hazel-stick, and he threw the frog as far as he could in the lake. In doing this he roused some wild ducks ; a mallard and two ducks got up, and they flew toward the larger lake in a line with an old castle ; and they had not disappeared from view when Bryden came toward her, and he and she drove the cows home together that evening.

They had not met very often when she said :

‘ James, you had better not come here so often calling to me.’

‘ Don't you wish me to come ?’

‘ Yes, I wish you to come well enough, but keeping company isn't the custom of the country, and I don't want to be talked about.’

‘ Are you afraid the priest would speak against us from the altar ?’

‘ He has spoken against keeping company, but it is not so much what the priest says, for there is no harm in talking.’

‘ But if you're going to be married there is no harm in walking out together.’

‘ Well, not so much, but marriages are made differently in these parts ; there isn't much courting here.’

And next day it was known in the village that James was going to marry Margaret Dirken.

His desire to excel the boys in dancing had caused a stir of gaiety in the parish, and for some time past there had been dancing in every house where there was a floor fit to dance upon ; and if the cottager had no money to pay for a barrel of beer, James Bryden, who had money, sent him a barrel, so that Margaret might get her dance. She told him that they sometimes crossed over into another parish where the priest was not so averse to dancing, and James wondered. And next morning at Mass he wondered at their simple fervour. Some of them held their hands above their head as they prayed, and all this was very new and very old to James Bryden. But the obedience of these people to their priest surprised him. When he was a lad they had not been so obedient, or he had forgotten their obedience ; and he listened in mixed anger and wonderment to the priest, who was scolding his parishioners, speaking to them by name, saying that he had heard there was dancing going on in their homes. Worse than that, he said he had seen boys and girls loitering about the road, and the talk that went on was of one kind—love. He said that newspapers containing love stories were finding their

way into the people's houses, stories about love, in which there was nothing elevating or ennobling. The people listened, accepting the priest's opinion without question. And their pathetic submission was the submission of a primitive people clinging to religious authority, and Bryden contrasted the weakness and incompetence of the people about him with the modern restlessness and cold energy of the people he left behind him.

One evening, as they were dancing, a knock came to the door, and the piper stopped playing, and the dancers whispered :

' Someone has told on us ; it is the priest.'

And the awe-stricken villagers crowded round the cottage fire, afraid to open the door. But the priest said that if they didn't open the door he would put his shoulder to it and force it open. Bryden went towards the door, saying he would allow no one to threaten him, priest or no priest, but Margaret caught his arm and told him that if he said anything to the priest, the priest would speak against them from the altar, and they would be shunned by the neighbours.

' I've heard of your goings on,' he said—' of your beer-drinking and dancing. I'll not have it in my parish. If you want that sort of thing you had better go to America.'

' If that is intended for me, sir, I'll go back to-morrow. Margaret can follow.'

' It isn't the dancing, it's the drinking I'm opposed to,' said the priest, turning to Bryden.

' Well, no one has drunk too much, sir,' said Bryden.

' But you'll sit here drinking all night,' and the priest's eyes went toward the corner where the women had gathered, and Bryden felt that the priest looked on the women as more dangerous than the porter. ' It's after midnight,' he said, taking out his watch.

By Bryden's watch it was only half-past eleven, and while they were arguing about the time Mrs. Scully offered Bryden's umbrella to the priest, for in his hurry to stop the dancing the priest had gone out without his ; and, as if to show Bryden that he bore him no ill-will, the priest accepted the loan of the umbrella, for he was thinking of the big marriage fee that Bryden would pay him.

' I shall be badly off for the umbrella to-morrow,' Bryden said, as soon as the priest was out of the house. He was going with his father-in-law to a fair. His father-in-law was learning him how to buy and sell cattle. The country was mending, and a man might become rich in Ireland if he only had a little capital. Margaret had an uncle on the other side of the lake who would give twenty pounds, and her father would give another twenty pounds. Bryden had saved two hundred pounds. Never in the village of Duncannon had a young couple begun life with so much prospect of success, and some time after Christmas was spoken of as the best time for the marriage ; James Bryden said that he would not be able to get his money out of America before the spring. The delay seemed to vex him, and he seemed anxious to be married, until one day he received a letter from America, from a man who had served in the bar with him. This friend wrote to ask Bryden if he were coming back. The letter was no more than a passing wish to see Bryden again. Yet Bryden stood looking at it, and everyone wondered what could be in the letter. It seemed momentous, and they hardly believed him when he said it was from a friend who wanted to know if his health were better. He tried to forget the letter, and he looked at the worn fields, divided by walls of loose stones, and a great longing came upon him.

The smell of the Bowery slum had come across the Atlantic, and had found him out in this western headland ; and one night he awoke from a dream in which he was hurling some drunken customer through the open doors into the darkness. He had seen his friend in his white duck jacket throwing drink from glass into glass amid the din of voices and strange accents ; he had heard the clang of money as it was swept into the till, and his sense sickened for the bar-room. But how should he tell Margaret Dirken that he could not marry her ? She had built her life upon this marriage. He could not tell her that he would not marry her . . . yet he must go. He felt as if he were being hunted ; the thought that he must tell Margaret that he could not marry her hunted him day after day as a weasel hunts a rabbit. Again and again he went to meet her with the intention of telling her that he did not love her, that their lives were not for one another, that it had all been a mistake, and that happily he had found out it was a mistake soon enough. But Margaret, as if she guessed what he was about to speak of, threw her arms about him and begged him to say he loved her, and that they would be married at once. He agreed that he loved her, and that they would be married at once. But he had not left her many minutes before the feeling came upon him that he could not marry her—that he must go away. The smell of the bar-room hunted him down. Was it for the sake of the money that he might make there that he wished to go back ? No, it was not the money. What then ? His eyes fell on the bleak country, on the little fields divided by bleak walls ; he remembered the pathetic ignorance of the people, and it was these things that he could not endure. It was the priest who came to forbid the dancing. Yes, it was the priest. As he stood looking at the line of the hills the bar-room seemed by him. He heard the politicians, and the excitement of politics was in his blood again. He must go away from this place—he must get back to the bar-room. Looking up, he saw the scanty orchard, and he hated the spare road that led to the village, and he hated the little hill at the top of which the village began, and he hated more than all other places the house where he was to live with Margaret Dirken—if he married her. He could see it from where he stood—by the edge of the lake, with twenty acres of pasture land about it, for the landlord had given up part of his demesne land to them.

He caught sight of Margaret, and he called her to come through the stile.

‘ I have just had a letter from America.’

‘ About the money ?’

‘ Yes, about the money. But I shall have to go over there.’

He stood looking at her, wondering what to say ; and she guessed that he would tell her that he must go to America before they were married.

‘ Do you mean, James, you will have to go at once ?’

‘ Yes,’ he said, ‘ at once. But I shall come back in time to be married in August. It will only mean delaying our marriage a month.’

They walked on a little way talking, and every step he took James felt that he was a step nearer the Bowery slum. And when they came to the gate Bryden said :

‘ I must walk on or I shall miss the train.’

‘ But,’ she said, ‘ you are not going now—you are not going to-day ?’

‘ Yes, this morning. It is seven miles. I shall have to hurry not to miss the train.’

And then she asked him if he would ever come back.

‘ Yes.’ he said, ‘ I am coming back.’

‘ If you are coming back, James, why don’t you let me go with you ?’

‘ You couldn’t walk fast enough. We should miss the train.’

‘ One moment, James. Don’t make me suffer ; tell me the truth. You are not coming back. Your clothes—where shall I send them ?’

He hurried away, hoping he would come back. He tried to think that he liked the country he was leaving, that it would be better to have a farmhouse and live there with Margaret Dirken than to serve drinks behind a counter in the Bowery. He did not think he was telling her a lie when he said he was coming back. Her offer to forward his clothes touched his heart, and at the end of the road he stood and asked himself if he should go back to her. He would miss the train if he waited another minute, and he ran on. And he would have missed the train if he had not met a car. Once he was on the car he felt himself safe—the country was already behind him. The train and the boat at Cork were mere formulæ ; he was already in America.

And when the tall skyscraper stuck up beyond the harbour he felt the thrill of home that he had not found in his native village, and wondered how it was that the smell of the bar seemed more natural than the smell of fields, and the roar of crowds more welcome than the silence of the lake’s edge. He entered into negotiations for the purchase of the bar-room. He took a wife, she bore him sons and daughters, the bar-room prospered, property came and went ; he grew old, his wife died, he retired from business, and reached the age when a man begins to feel there are not many years in front of him, and that all he has had to do in life has been done. His children married, lonesomeness began to creep about him in the evening, and when he looked into the firelight, a vague, tender reverie floated up, and Margaret’s soft eyes and name vivified the dusk. His wife and children passed out of mind, and it seemed to him that a memory was the only real thing he possessed, and the desire to see Margaret again grew intense. But she was an old woman, she had married, maybe she was dead. Well, he would like to be buried in the village where he was born.

There is an unchanging, silent life within every man that none knows but himself, and his unchanging, silent life was his memory of Margaret Dirken. The bar-room was forgotten and all that concerned it, and the things he saw most clearly were the green hillside, and the bog lake and the rushes about it, and the greater lake in the distance, and behind it the blue line of wandering hills.

The untilled field ([1914])

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